

# WALL TO WALL PIGS

## The Farmer John Murals



by Chris McGowan  
Photographs by Dennis Keeley

**T**housands of pigs roam free every day just a stone's throw from downtown Los Angeles. The blissful porkers inhabit a neighborhood known as Vernon, a bleak industrial zone between Soto Street and the L.A. "river." Amidst blue skies, green grass and serene streams, the pigs frolic, as pigs will, their porcine minds are oblivious to the grim slaughterhouses, tanneries and packing plants which crowd in on them from all sides.

Not are they disturbed by the diesel rigs which thunder down Soto Street or the men with blood-stained white smocks walking in and out of the slaughterhouses. Are these pigs dumb? Are they fearless? No, these pigs are paint. They exist on the outer walls of the Farmer John plant of the Clougherty Meat Packing Company, and they make up the largest mural to be found in all of Los Angeles.

The vision of two Austrian immigrants, Les Grimes and Arno Jordan, the giant "Hog Heaven" mural runs for four city blocks around the perimeter of the Farmer John plant, covering thousands of square feet of its peripheral walls. The huge project depicts countless pigs at play. They wallow happily in river mud, eat their fill of whatever pigs eat — about which the less said the better — and play against a backdrop of rolling farmland. Pigs trot along behind sows, hogs chase howling dogs, and porkers flee from farmboys wielding slingshots.

Actual features of the Farmer John buildings have been incorporated into the illusionary landscape. Pigs are often seen peering into real windows, and other facets of the plant, such as "no trespassing" signs, are occasionally worked into the bucolic porcine paradise. And, in a bit of *trompe l'oeil* come to pigdom, phony plant windows have been painted, replete with scared squealers peeping out, trying to escape an ignominious transfiguration into Farmer John franks or sausages.

"Hog Heaven" has received its share of encomiums over the years. The *London Times* devoted four color pages to it in 1972, and a French film crew recently shot a short documentary on the mural. A student at Hunter College used it as the subject of her master of fine arts thesis and showed her slides of the paintings at USC's Fisher Gallery eight years ago. Los Angeles Times art critic William Wilson called the work "bright and impressionistic" and *Sunset* magazine termed it "a monument of vernacular art... beginning to be mentioned in the same breath with the Watts Towers as an important aesthetic landmark."

**V**ernacular or otherwise, Grimes and Jordan's monument to porkers was begun in 1957 by Grimes, a movie set painter for 20th Century Fox. In between film jobs, Grimes toiled away at the idyllic panorama for 11 years, until he fell to his death from a

scaffolding in 1968 while painting in a section of sky above Vernon Avenue on the south side of the Farmer John plant. Little is known about Grimes. Barnie Clougherty, who hired him, is long dead, and the Clougherty-clan members today claim to have never met the painter. Big Al, the old guard at the Farmer John main gate, remembers Grimes as "a real nice guy" but recalls little else. Rumors among Farmer John workers abound: that Grimes used to be a professional wrestler, was jolly and liked to take a drink on the job now and then, that occasionally he became moody and ill-tempered.

The porcine panegyric was half-finished when Grimes died. Arno Jordan, then working on murals in Palm Springs, was offered a job through a friend, a man who sold industrial flooring to the Cloughertys. "When I first looked at it," recalls Jordan, "I thought, 'Man, you got a lot of space here.'"

Jordan, who is now 46 and lives in Rialto, was born in St. Jacob, Austria, and came to the U.S. in 1952, when he was 18. "Things were pretty bad in Austria after the war. There was hardly any food around. All the friends I had were leaving, going into the Foreign Legion, going to Australia, going to South America. I had an uncle living in Chicago, so I came here."

Jordan was living in San Bernardino and painting nightclub and restaurant murals for his income when he got the call. Twelve years and a thousand pigs

later, he estimates that he's originated about half of the present-day work and repainted every square inch of the entire mural at least once.

**M**aintenance of "Hog Heaven" is a never-ending task, since smog and industrial pollutants take their toll on the paint. "The smog is the worst thing," says Jordan. "It combines with the moisture when it rains and gets foggy and turns into acid that eats right into the paint." The hardest-to-wash walls, which border 37th, Soto and Vernon, must be touched up once a year.

"And there's a lot of stuff coming from the inside of the building, from when they wash stuff down with detergent. The detergents are really strong and they go through the walls, right through the cement blocks and the bricks, and get behind the paint. When the sun hits it, gas bubbles are created which eventually push the paint right off the wall."

The techniques used in the mural are surprisingly simple. "For the grass effect, I just dip the brush into the paint and throw it on. It works the best for the effect; from the distance it looks good and that's what it's made for. I use a paint roller for the sky and clouds and a paint brush for everything else." Exterior latex enamels utilized for work on metal areas. Jordan paints quickly; he estimates that it takes about a week for him to cover a ten-foot by 100-foot area of the mural.

But for all the surprising simplicity of technique, the success of the project is undeniable. The landscapes are peacefully pastoral, the pigs are endowed with noticeable personalities, and the overall mural transforms a gritty industrial area into a much more pleasing environment. The paintings are so attractive to the eye, in fact, that Jordan may be one of the few painters who can measure the effectiveness of his work by the number of car crashes he causes. "I've seen some fender-benders," he laughs, "when some guy slows down to look at the paintings."

Over the last decade, many critics have attempted to ascribe various metaphoric or political qualities to "Hog Heaven." L.A. Times critic Wilson went so far as to write, "The reality behind the swine Shangri-La is the factual unsentimental packaging of meat. In all innocence the Great Pig Murals have become a metaphor of a life of luxury and affluence led in ignorance of the price it exacts."

Jordan, however, sees the paintings in an entirely different light: "The idea was really originated by Bernie Clougherty. He told Les Grimes more or less what to do, the same as he told me what to do. The idea behind the whole thing was to improve the scenery and the neighborhood, to change the atmosphere."

Whether or not "Hog Heaven" has transcended the original conception of

Bernie Clougherty and become a metaphoric statement, it is certain that the work is both the largest and one of the most interesting murals in Los Angeles. The painting is an ongoing project, growing larger year by year as Farmer John puts up new buildings and Jordan populates their exteriors with his hymn to the American porker.

To view this awesome tribute to pork-don, drive down the Harbor Freeway to Vernon Avenue and get off going east. At Santa Fe, turn left (north) and then immediately turn right (east) on Vernon again. Follow the heavy barnyard smell to Soto and you're there. ■

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